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A Bridge Between Generations

An Interview with Bianca Swift

Julian C. Chambliss, *Michigan State University* 

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You can listen to this interview on the [*Scholarly Editing* website](#).



Bianca Swift

Bianca Swift serves as Assistant Editor on the Charles Chesnutt Archive. Swift holds an MA in English (Creative Writing) and a BA in English with minors in French and African American Studies. Swift is a published author and a recognized performance poet. She has worked for the Nebraska Writers Collective as a Teaching Artist and has performed in Spoken Word Poetry Competitions in Philadelphia, PA, Houston, TX, and Richmond, VA. Swift's work represents an archival practice that links documentary editing to place-based recovery, public memory, and a vision for a community-engaged archive. Working with Kenneth Price on the Chesnutt Archive, she has been at the forefront of imagining ways to recover and connect Chesnutt's archive to the public. Readers of *Scholarly Editing* should see in Swift's journey important questions about the value of the archive to the public, the future of editorial labor, and the ways in which ethical archival practice shapes culture. Swift articulates a vision of recovery practice that wrestles with the benefits and challenges technology poses to textual scholarship. Regardless of the technological changes, she highlights the critical need to ensure that archives have relationships with the communities they serve.

Julian Chambliss: Alright, Bianca.

Bianca Swift: Hello.

Julian Chambliss: Thank you for joining me.

Bianca Swift: Thank you for having me. I'm so excited for this interview.

Julian Chambliss: So, as this is for Volume 43 of *Scholarly Editing* Voices and Perspectives section, so I want to start with a question that is kind of inspired by the fact that— of your personal worldview and experience. So, as an emerging scholar, what unique opportunities and challenges do you see engaging with archival recovery work at this stage of your career?

Bianca Swift: I think I get opportunities like this or I get to go places or travel places or talk at conferences, which seems very— at once it seems— it's very amazing, but it also feels very strange and a little undeserved. But that is one of the really, really cool opportunities. And I think some of the challenges are: archival work is not something that I learned much of in high school or college. So a lot of the work that I'm doing feels very, very, very new to me and it feels like I'm learning along the way. And I think especially with maybe, like, digital humanities work and, like, digital archivism in particular, maybe that's just kind of how it is right now because it's so new. But it feels very—it a little bit, it a little bit is like imposter syndrome. It a little bit feels like I should not be allowed to be in the places that I'm in, and I don't have the knowledge base that everyone else seems to have, and yet I still keep getting these opportunities and I still keep getting asked questions that I'm, I'm never fully confident in my ability to answer.

Julian Chambliss: Well, I, I want to follow up with— on that question by asking you what drew you to the Charles Chesnutt archive and the opportunities represented by that project and the people running that project?

Bianca Swift: It's actually an incredibly interesting and also really sad and scary story, but the reason that I even became aware of the Charles Chesnutt archive—or Charles Chesnutt as a figure at all - is because we had—for, from the year, oh gosh, from I think it was, like, the end of my freshman year to the beginning of my sophomore year, we had a Nazi on our campus. We had a person who self-identifies a Nazi, I won't—but we had a Nazi on our campus and he had a video of himself, like, saying that he was going to kind of enact terror on the black and brown and basically, so anyone non-white on campus. Yes. So the school reacted to this incredibly poorly. The university at large reacted incredibly poorly. They made us shirts that were basically along the same idea of, like, love beats hate, which felt very unhelpful, and they had a open meeting.

And in this open meeting I was recounting some of the things that had happened to me or the things that I felt like I had had to do. I had a bunch of my white friends walk me to and from campus, and my mother was trying to pull me out of school because she was very worried. And I had a few poems about this, and I read those poems to the meeting, and Ken either happened to be there or happened to have been told about these poems. And they had a smaller delegation that was just the colleges, not the university at—whole that was actively trying to, like, do actual work to protect students and trying to figure out what they could do for them. And I was invited to a meeting for this and in that meeting, after I had told my piece and tried to help talk through what could be done, Ken brought up to me that he was starting the Charles Chesnutt archive.

And he said that it is unfortunate that I would have been—because at this point I was seriously considering leaving the university and going somewhere else, and he said it was unfortunate that I would be leaving UNL as he would have loved to have me on this archive. And we were talking about the English department and, and how it's still the university campus, but marginally safe or marginally more safe. I think at one point, I don't—I can't remember exactly, but I think at one point he either got on the phone with my mother, essentially helped convince me to stay. So because of Kenneth Price, and because of the Charles Chesnutt archive, I ended up staying rather than going somewhere else. They—the story, there was a—at that very moment, this was, like, right after the Charlottesville riot, the parallels of our lives felt so crazy similar that I was like, oh, this is something that I have to do. And that is how I started working on the Charles Chesnutt archive.

Julian Chambliss: You did say his name Ken Price, but can you tell me a little bit about working with Ken?

Bianca Swift: Working with Ken is truly such a joy. I think that learning all of these digital humanities stuff and, like, figuring things out that I didn't even consider before, he's s—at once very, very knowledgeable and feels very, very reasonable. And of course is older and of course is steeped in academia, and yet he manages again and again to not be the person that it is very easy to be in a position of power. And he is helpful and he has invited me and helped me and guided me into so many opportunities and so many—yeah, so many opportunities that I wouldn't have otherwise been able to do. And also just inspired me to do work that I wouldn't have thought myself capable of. I am a poet by trade and a poet at heart, and I would say that digital archivism is a little bit like the math of the English world, [laughs] and I would never have thought that that is something that I would've been drawn to. And yet I love it. I love it so much, and it was because of Ken Price and, and his guidance and his help that, that it's so nice and so amazing to be there.

Julian Chambliss: I'm going to use that "digital archive is the math of the English world." I'm going to use that in, like, social media posts. Just wait. It struck me from our, our sort of earlier conversations that there's a way that African-American histories, and you kind of alluded to it when you were talking about how you got involved with the archive, the African-American histories are circular, reflective, and so I'm wondering how did that, that framework shape your interpretation of Chesnutt's work as you're thinking about your work with the archive and, and perhaps how did that shape your own work as well? Because I think at some level it seems that your, your work and Chesnutt's work are strangely intertwined.

Bianca Swift: Yeah, I would say—so, a—there's a paper that I wrote and that I've continued, it's, like, kind of like a thing where I just add onto it and add onto it. I think I said something along the lines of 'history is not cyclical, time is not so unimaginative that it deals and doubles,' but every line is a loop and we are constantly spiraling around, almost like a ripple of a pond. I think I talk about how reflective I feel like the black experience is maybe all the time. I talk about it in, my essay about Charles Chesnutt because I feel—it felt so strange to almost feel like I was looking into a mirror of something that felt so, so similar to what I was going through. It also in a weird way, I kind of realized that maybe we have been sold-and I think probably Martin Luther King Jr. said this as well-but we've been kind of sold a lie of progress.

Maybe this is just a narrative that got pushed a lot where I was from, and it's a very—it's a narrative of 'you shouldn't complain too much, at least things are better now.' And I think because that was the narrative, I was very fearful of complaining and very fearful of, like, saying anything. But looking into Charles Chesnutt and going, "Oh, this is the same. This is—I don't know if I can cuss, 'this is the same stuff.'" This is the same stuff that was happening then, it's happening now. And that means that I'm allowed to open my mouth about it and say something about it. It in particular has a very, very strong connection ancestrally and to the past. I'm thinking of generational trauma. I'm thinking of things built into your DNA and bones, but also because of how often do you hear, like, o—old heads or, like, things passed down, or grandmas and grandparents are, like, the heads of the household and they're leading the charge, and they're—and specifically, I think because we lost something in the slave trade that we might not ever get back, the, the, the roots to where we stood now are the most important. And I think that that repetitive history, we're always looking for that.

Julian Chambliss: I think for readers of *Scholarly Editing*, the implication of why the archive is important is tied up at some level in contemporary conversations about the past, right? And that gives me the opportunity to sort of ask about a kind of community dimension related to the work that you've done. I mean, obviously I think there's an element of outreach that is connected to the Charles Chesnutt Archive, and I wonder from your perspective, how does that community engagement role change the way you think about the archive and its purpose?

Bianca Swift: I think that the community aspect is perhaps the most important aspect to me, specifically with the Charles Chesnutt Archive, we are operating inside of a PWI, right, a predominantly white institution. And most of the people who I work with-though they are lovely and hold my heart and they're amazing-are not people who are black. They all, they all suffer the fatal flaw of not being African-American. And so I think it's incredibly important, but we've had these conversations, especially knowing that predominantly white institutions are more likely to get funded, right.

Or now we're more likely to get funded and they were more likely to have the chance to do a lot of this work. And so I think we all decided, but I think it was really, really, really important for me to make sure that we were giving back as much as possible to the community that Charles Chesnutt loved in Cleveland, Ohio. Charles Chesnutt is alive and well in my heart, and also my uncle, but is also just like a—it's almost like I'm outlining the vacuum space of where he was. Right? That's kind of a little bit what it feels like in archivism. It's going, here's this big empty space and I know what was in it because I can kind of draw the details around the empty space. But when, when I get to go into a community and when I get to go into a school that took on Charles Chesnutt's name or when I get to work with people in Quad A, the African-American Auxiliary archive in Cleveland, Ohio, I, it's a little bit like having pieces of the inside of a puzzle, of going, 'oh, this is—he lived and breathed here in a very real way.

This is the air he was breathing, this is the space he took up.' It also kind of makes you realize that an archive is nothing unless it speaks to and works for the community. Because if you have an archive, and this is a little bit how I was thinking about, especially in times of strife, if you are spending so much time archiving the past that you don't care and handle and heal and love the people who are currently alive, you are just kind of like feeding into an archive business. It's always going to be the people who were forgotten. And if we are forgetting the people of the present in order to tend to the people of the past, we are making the exact same mistakes. An archive always has to be in the hands of people and community and always has to be accessible to them, incredibly accessible to them. Otherwise, it's not as useful of a tool as I think it could be. And I think engaging in the community, specifically in Cleveland, Ohio, and even in Lincoln, Nebraska, I think made me realize that even more.

Julian Chambliss: I think that's a really great answer, and it gives me an opportunity to, like, engage in a series of questions around Afrofuturism. Obviously, as I mentioned to you early on, one of the ways that I'm trying to sort of think through this volume is these sort of intersections between Afrofuturism, AI, and the archive. And part of the reason I believe that that kind of intersection is important is because in the theorizing Afrofuturism, many theorists talk about the importance of the archive, And they talk very deliberately about the nature of recovery necessary to decolonialize the archive. And so, I guess my question for you is, it's okay if you don't have a perfect answer, But when you think about this idea that the past and the future are in the same frame, which is one of the things that I think Afrofuturism really put a lot of emphasis on, we're not free from the past and the present, and as a result, the future is sort of entangled in whatever resolutions we come up with about the past. How do you see that interplay of the past and the present and the future operating in your approach to activating the archive, telling stories with the archive, writing about the archive? What is the role of the archive? Because I think you alluded to a vision of the archive as liberatory, if I may be so bold, and what does it mean to, to activate that liberatory vision of the archive?

Bianca Swift: I think that the past and the present and even the future are kind of a suspended thing, specifically for African Americans and African-American culture. I'm thinking specifically of Christina Sharpe's *In The Wake*, and the way that she described it, it felt so true to me almost being in a liminal space of timeness, not timelessness, but just time. I feel like there is something so important about time and about, I don't want to say repetition, 'cause that's not what I mean, but maybe, like, about its spirality to black people in African-American culture. And I think specifically I, in my writing, I like to joke-and it's not a joke, it's actually serious-that I have written more about Charles Chesnutt than any person currently living. I have written more poems to and about Charles Chesnutt than anyone in my real life, and that includes family. And I think that that is— there are moments I think where the act of archivism and the liberatory nature of it in the way that I, like, interact with Charles Chesnutt feels so real and prescient and, like, close, I almost forget that he's dead.

I think, like, in a very weird way, I feel like he's my family. Like, I feel incredibly close to Charl—to Charles Chesnutt in a way that you can't necessarily be if you read a history chapter, right. Because of the archive, I know things about Charles Chesnutt, like, at one point, his son sent him a bunch of letters that were three to four pages long, and at the end he would ask for lots of money. Or that he would, whenever he was gone on fishing trips, he would have his office ladies send him letters and letters of office gossip just about telling him that things were happening. And so many specific things about Charles Chesnutt that I just would not have known and that I do now, and that maybe, probably there is maybe an argument that I shouldn't, right? Like, I wasn't in his personal network, but I do because of the archive.

It's always important and it's always powerful to remember that you are not the only human being alive or who exists. I think the word is “sonder,” to suddenly realize someone else has a life as nuanced and beautiful as yours. That's a little bit of what the archive does. I think you can read an essay about someone, and that's incredibly powerful. But I think if you could see an archival note of, like, Charles Chesnutt kind of drawing doodles on the back of a letter, maybe that's even more powerful, right? Like, in—a little bit. And I think I write to him like that. I think I use Charles Chesnutt a little bit as, like, a mirror on my thoughts and the world and also on his thoughts and the world because it's—he was a person, because he was a person. He's not free of critique, but he's also not free of being forgiven. And I feel like it affects a lot of it.

Julian Chambliss: Yeah, that's really interesting because I think one of the things that you sort of alluded to there is the way that as an archivist, as someone who's sort of engaging and nurturing an archive, you bring back to life. You resurrect a person, right. You know, from my perspective, and when thinking about an Afrofuturist canon, Chesnutt would be in it. And I wonder for you, and you've reflected on this, like, you mentioned one of his writings, "The Future American" essay for instance, which I had never heard of, right, and I was like, "oh, this is really, oh, okay, I see exactly what you mean." But that future American essay kind of represents a kind of futurist thinking. And so when you think about Chesnutt, how would you connect him to a kind of Afrofuturist tradition, even if, even if people wouldn't necessarily frame him that way? And I would like to point out that it's often true of black writers that I think they are in the Afrofuturist tradition, that they write things that are fictive—that are speculative, but they don't write things that are analytical and it'll be thinking about the future.

And, you know, and this stretches back, especially in the context of my own work. If I think about a, a figure like Martin Robeson Delaney, right, who writ— who wrote *Blake*, which is a novel that many people will associate with being, like, this is like an Afrofuturist novel, but he's also a person who wrote medical stories and he wrote like, you know, political treaties and often thought of as the father of Black Nationalism, right. He actively thought about what it would mean for black people to return to Africa, went to Africa, did a survey, all these things. Other figures I think of the same way, Zora Neale Hurston, you know. Yes, she writes these, you know, anthropological works. She writes fictive work, she writes journalistic work. The letters are— letters are really important to tools in the hands of black intellectuals. And so I am curious what you think about Chesnutt in this tradition as someone so intimate with his writings, with his tools.

Bianca Swift: Mhmm. I think it's so interesting that you bring that up because yeah, maybe this is just a particular quirk of people who are, who can claim the title of Afrofuturist, but Charles Chesnutt was also, like, a lawyer, he was a stenographer. Like, he was incredibly analytical in his thinking, and he was also very, I almost want to say practical, very steadfast. He thought through things a lot, , a lot. And I'm thinking of, like, first of all, two of his quotes, which I don't even think, which could very much, I feel like, speak towards an Afrofuturism ideal now, because he talks a lot about time and he talks a lot about what is and is not possible. So we have the two, like, pretty famous quotes, right. "There's time enough, but none to spare," which somehow feels incredibly Afrofuturist to me. And then "Impossibilities are merely things of which we have not learned or which we do not wish to happen."

Those are the two big Chesnutt quotes, and I think about those specifically. I write about them all the time. Those are my two quotes that I think about a lot when I'm writing poetry, but also because I think Charles Chesnutt wouldn't have considered himself maybe specifically looking towards the future. If anything, I think he was trying to emulate or speak towards a kind of, like, past, he was very into Greek, he was self-taught in a lot of things. He was very into, like, Greek epics and, like, Latin, and I think he taught himself a lot of stuff like this. And so he was in a weird way trying to, like, speak towards a past tradition, but that was also incredibly Afrofutur—like, I think so much of Afrofuturism is so ancestral. I'm once again, going back to my, my Afrofuturism talking point that I feel like I have a, a— know lot of, which is, that's right, The Black Panther movies.

And I think that there is so ancestral, so much of Afrofuturism is holding onto a very utopian future while also not forgetting and not neglecting your ancestral pasts and traditions. And I feel like if that doesn't describe Charles Chesnutt down to the ground, he was always looking towards something. He was always working on something, always trying to do something new. And he did, right, with "The Mayor of Tradition," that was incredibly new, wrote a fictional tale about a mixed-race man who was a doctor and a riot happened. He was the main character, he was heroic, he was the heroic character. And he at one point, I think, was portrayed as better as a person than a lot of the white people that were around him, which I think was incredibly futuristic for him to do. But, like, still keeping on to, kind of, like, holding onto, kind of, like, an ancestral or just, kind of like, a tradition, like, some kind of past. And I also think he kind of inherits that mysticism and mythically of a lot of Afrofuturisms in his, like, "color line" tales, his short stories. I'm thinking of his [The Wife of His Youth and Other Stories] of the Color Line, um, where we deal with, like, a folk tales, but the main character or the person who's always telling these stories, utilizes this, like, narrative, this history, to end up on top. Like he always comes out with a better deal. And he's almost acting a little bit like, what's the African

Julian Chambliss: Br'er Rabbit? Like Br'er Rabbit, that kind of...

Bianca Swift: Yeah, it's almost like a trickster god, who's—he's kind of, he's almost, like, spinning these tales in a—in a very trickster god way to ensure that he, like, kind of, because he was a slave, so he's still working on this plantation, but he was a slave, right. So he's, but he's using this to kind of, like, as the stories go, get himself out of, like, sticky situations as he's, like, telling it to this, like, these white, like, people, white landowners who came to, like, inherit this plantation. And I just, all of that, I don't know, it all feels very Afrofuturist to me, and I think I've just been thinking about it a lot. When you mentioned that, I was like, oh, this is incredibly in line with Afrofuturism.

Julian Chambliss: Well, you know, obviously one of the things about this issue and the intersections is the sort of challenge of technology, opportunities of the technology, right. And I should preface, part of the reason that this sort of theme makes sense to me as the editor is because Afrofuturism asks really important questions about technoculture. What is it that we expect from technology, right? And how much of our expectations in the West are framed by kind of technology utopianism that is at some level connected to empire, right, like, exploitation, making money, making, you know, garnering power, so on and so forth. So, you know, with that in mind, you know, AI and the archive become a very complicated conversation, right. So from your perspective, what are, what are the really pressing implications, good and bad, of generative AI for archival work, especially in the context of perhaps preserving and interpreting black literary and cultural history?

Bianca Swift: I have been thinking about this ever since we brought it up the first time, and I still don't think I have a good or solid idea or thought about this. Because I think I am still figuring out my own opinions on the AI that we currently have and the AI that we seemingly will be soon to have. And I think, when I think about the implications of artificial intelligence as in archive in preserving and interpreting, I think that I could imagine hundreds of good ways it could be utilized in really, really interesting and fascinating ways. Maybe, perhaps, like, maybe I'm thinking in the Smithsonian and, like, giving people kind of, like, very beautiful, summarized descriptions of, like, here's the context of this piece' and, like, just on the fly about anything that there is, because I think that that's something that the artificial intelligence can do. It's very good at grabbing a lot of details about something and combining them.

And I think that most likely it's soon going to be very good at doing the work that I often do, which is encoding TEI, encoding, right, getting Basic XML encoding languages down the page and markup languages down to, like, make the process speedier. It also would probably be helpful in one of the biggest hangups I think, in an archive or the difficulties, especially when you're doing with letters, is interpretation of some words. And I think AI could most certainly help with kind of going, like, "okay, well here's probably, it could be this, or it could be this, or it could be this," because most people wrote in cursive and bad handwriting, it seems exists all throughout history. [laughs] And so that would probably be incredibly helpful to have some kind of artificial intelligence that can, like, parse through this and go, "oh, based on, consume all the handwriting, and go, 'Oh, based on how he wrote his J's, this seems to be closer to an S and not a J.'"

So it's not what you think it is. I think that I can think of hundreds of ways that AI could be helpful in an archival capacity, but I think maybe my hangup is, I can think of millions of ways that the current people that we have in power can use it to absolutely ruin and destroy and desecrate. So I think that AI, it can either do a lot of good for preserving cultural history. I'm thinking specifically of, so much of black history is oral, and that means that if a particular family dies off or if a particular person dies off, or if a particular grandmother dies off before she gets information out, things are lost forever. There's a carrot cake in my family that I have to, someone has to tell me, because it's not written down anywhere. And if I don't know it, there's not going to be a carrot cake anymore, but no one will say anything.

And I think it can be incredibly good at preserving oral histories in that way. Do I quite technologically know how? No, but I'm going to leave that up to the AI experts, but I do think there's a world in which that exists. But the other thing is I think that, there's a theory, I think, that we're living in a, like, a dead zone of information in the future, and I—maybe like a dark age, in that so much of our media exists online and so much of our media can be easily deleted and has been easily deleted. And the way that we archive—like, right now, we have a digital archive and we've taken steps for it to be preserved, but h-what do we know about how the internet will be preserved in the future? And I think AI could be doing great things for that preservation in terms of keeping a centralized database of knowledge about that online.

But also, I think I'm always thinking about this from the way that, like, of a capitalist with a big black hat would think, and it is always going to be the issue is AI could do this, but I don't think there is going to be a step from someone who is sitting in Silicon Valley with, like, just comedically money falling out of their pockets. I don't think there's going to be a step where they go, "oh, the AI utilized," and also illegally, right? Didn't ask, "utilize this, like, archival work in order to come up with this information. Therefore, we don't need that archive anymore." I think that that is a step that is feasible for people to do things like this, right, and it creates less traffic to an archive, and therefore it becomes a little harder to argue that that archive should exist. And we know, I feel like as people who are like, academics, the logical step of going, 'well, that archive needs to exist because that's where AI is pulling the information from.' [laughs]

But I think that sometimes that third step, that, like, jump is very, very hard to get to, especially when we're thinking about AI. I am not afraid of or upset at AI as a concept. I am in fear of and angry at and upset at the way that I know it is going to be utilized and the way that it's currently being utilized. Because of our thought leaders and because we have companies whose rule is "move fast [and] break," and because we have this and because Google won't allow me to turn off the AI generated thing at the top of my header page, we're culture killing a little bit. So it's both. It could be this, and I think it's a very Afrofuturism take to go, like, look at how beautiful and interesting and imaginative this could be. But I fear, that with the reality, it is instead going to be something that kind of, like, absorbs and absorbs and absorbs and consumes and consumes and consumes and then is going to be reflected back at you as a way to make an argument for your nonexistence.

Julian Chambliss: I think that's a perfectly reasonable answer actually. I want to sort of continue down that path because I think there are two questions in the top of mind. The first is I think there's a lot of scholarship from scholars like say, [Jessica] Marie Johnson or Ruha Benjamin, who talk very deliberately about the colonial legacies embedded in the archive and the need for us to sort of, like, rethink our approach to archives. And obviously there's, there's always been, especially over the last few years, a lot of the activism around community-based archives. And so, you know, as someone who works in an archive, someone who's concerned about the archive's future, someone who sees it as an important tool for the community, what are the interventions or re-imaginings that you would pursue in the context of utilizing AI? I understand everything you just said about, like, evil that men do. I completely understand that, but I'm going to go the other way and be like, you have power and authority. You work in archive right now. You could intervene. What would you do, Bianca, to change this story? What would you do?

Bianca Swift: What would I do?

Julian Chambliss: How would you whip that AI into a freedom engine?

Bianca Swift: Into a freedom—AI, I think, has the opportunity to maybe do the thing that the archive did for me at a large scale kind of all at once. In that, it is now impossible for me, It is now impossible for me to have someone talk about, to say, Charles Chesnutt did “__[blank]__” and did the say the historically, and I don’t want to say that textbooks are, like, uninteresting and flat, because that’s not what I mean. But the historically kind of flat textbook definition of Charles Chesnutt or the historically textbook definition of maybe Martin Luther King Jr., which we’ve been having a bunch of problems with, because there’s a huge misinterpretation of him because of how unknown he is. And on a historical lens, I think that there is something to be said about the way AI can almost make people people, again, [laughs] make people people again, because I’m thinking specifically of AI’s ability to take information and then kind of hallucinate context around that information, specifically from, like, a community standpoint.

This is a great way to get, like, people who aren’t deep, deep in the dregs of an archive to be interested, like, actually interested, and actually want to think about historical figures. Imagine, if you will-this is a very Afrofuturist take, and I don’t know how far away or how close we are to this-imagine if you quite literally could do the thing of, like, “oh, who would you sit down and have a cup of coffee with if you could?” Like, imagine if we could take all of Charles Chesnutt’s letters and writings, plug them into an AI and go-which also is a little scary, so maybe we put some parameters on this-but go, like, recreate, like, a conversation or an ideal or an opinion or a, with this person purely from an educational standpoint. But I definitely think that having this opportunity would be so fascinating and so helpful.

And also, like, it very much gives a Afrofuturism way to commune with ancestors in a very direct way. Charles Chesnutt can, through the use of AI, have opinions that maybe he didn’t personally have, but that feel real and prescient and present enough to interest people in the very important work of historical upkeep. I feel like we’re losing that. I feel like so much stuff is getting gonad or getting deleted or getting whisked away, and so many people are kind of fine with that because history is like a nebulous, untouchable cloud in the sky that’s nice to see, but you’re not sure what exactly it does for you. And if you can go, “oh, here’s a, here’s me talking to Martin Luther King Jr. Here’s me talking to Booker T. Washington. Here’s, like, W.E.B. Du Bois telling me more in depth about his, like,’ what was it, ‘his great eight or fab five, or’ what was his thing [laughs]?”

Julian Chambliss: Oh, talented tenth.

Bianca Swift: Talented tenth! This is him talking to me. I feel like that would maybe action actionize so many people to caring about and wanting to protect history and history as it actually is, as it stands, right, because history is being rewritten and it's being taken away. And I think AI is a huge point and a huge way to protect that truth and protect, like, the reality of it. And that's one thing that I can think of. Um, I'm sure there's plenty more, but I'm thinking specifically of just like bringing history and making it more accessible and more dynamic for, like, a larger audience.

Julian Chambliss: Yeah, no, that's a great answer. This is going to be my last question, and I'm always mindful, um, when you're asking people questions, like, you don't have to have an answer for every question, but as someone who is a creative who works in archive, you're a poet, you're an archivist, and I'm particularly interested in what you sort of alluded to throughout our conversation, which is, like, the uncertain future related to the archive and learning and memory and what we understand. What would you like to see happen from a kind of teaching and learning perspective in the context of the archive?

Bianca Swift: This kind of feels a little bit like the question of, like, if you want to make bread from scratch, you have to start by creating the universe, right. Where I, I think that the future of the archive, my, like, pinnacle future, my Afrofuturism utopia, where there are beautiful skyscrapers in the sky and everything's silver for some reason and we have flying cars, is that I think that I would love it if AI contributed to a culture, like, a huge indepth national, maybe even global culture of oral history. Stories are maybe the most powerful thing in the world, second only to money. And I think that AI, if done correctly, could do so much. I'm thinking of recreating a classroom space around a historical spinning of, like, a genuine tale, of, like, making people care about people who existed because of people that exist, right. I'm thinking of combining those things, maybe even I think, I'm thinking of in my head,

I'm like, well, we have to recreate the entire school system. And I think specifically about that in that if you ask any person who's not actively entrenched in academia, most people, they're going to tell you that poetry is inaccessible, it's not interesting, and it's confusing. And that is because in high school, all we did was read Shakespeare plays [laughs] and Robert Frost, and we were told that every, every poem is a puzzle that you have to dig deep into and dissect and you—in order to get it, you have to be one of an elite few. And this is sometimes true, but more often it's not. And I think in the way that I think poetry should have been taught, which is that it should be contemporary poets, very, very accessible, very, very present contemporary poets, and then moved to Shakespeare like a present too backwards way of teaching. And that's how I teach poetry. History, with AI's help, in a weird way could do a very, very interesting and cool thing of holding tightly onto a humanist perspective and putting people and life first.

I think if we could build a whole story, write and craft a story that we use to tell a bunch of elementary schoolers the perspective of a Martin Luther King. I keep going because thinking of the huge, the huge people, right, but the perspective of a Martin Luther King Jr. rally from the perspective of another seven-year-old, another eight-year-old, and now we're doing a thing of they are, like, in the narrative. They're like, "oh, that's me!" And I understand it, from that perspective. AI could be very, very helpful with that. And not in maybe a manipulation-y way --though it just seems a little manipulation but less than that, but just more like in a, "here is how you learn to care about the past, and here is how the past affected people in the past, and here's how the past can affect you." And I feel like that could help bring back a culture of, like, storytelling and a culture of, like, holding history, like, with you and not just, like, in textbooks so that hopefully we don't, like, live in a world where the things we know are, like, gone or largely erased.

Julian Chambliss: You know I—that's really interesting. I think that that offers a really meaningful consideration of like 'What does it mean to leverage the archive with technical tools of today?' And when you were talking I was like, "oh, yeah, that's a really interesting idea." What if I can foresee some things too? Not all of them good, but I often think about this in the context of trying to tell the story of the history of retrenchment, right. Like, you know, societies make progress and then they fall backwards. Why does that happen? And there are often ways where the language of, and we experience this every day, the language of why someone might think America's not great anymore is steeped in very particular mythologies of the past, right, and they don't actually know the real story [laughs], so they just want to make up a story. And it'd be great if, like, you had something when that person was on TV in real time going like, 'oh, actually this actually happened, like, yeah, it's complicated.'

Bianca Swift: It is because it's also just like, well, imagine if you have this mythos and then you have, like, an AI — I'm once again thinking of, like, everything to me has to be on a transparent, like, projection screen, because that's how we know it's the future. But imagine you literally had, like, an AI version of your grandpa and he's like, "Dude, that's not what happened. That's not..." [laughs] He's like, 'so this is what actually happened.' Because it's also like, who are you more likely to believe?" And I think that that's scary probably, but also could be helpful. [laughs]

Julian Chambliss: Right? Yeah, it could be super helpful. Well, and I think their idea of, like, an oral history project where people are putting their words in. I mean, the idea of that because we live in a very digital world and the archiving of things, you know, internet archive is a nonprofit. That job is at some level to be the Internet's memory, And, like, that's an impossible job. They're working so hard. Right? Yeah. 'And things don't get erased.' Like, we don't end up in some like, some kind of Kafkaesque nightmarescape. But I want to thank you for talking with me.

Bianca Swift: Thank you so much for having me.

Julian Chambliss: Yeah, and thank you for talking with *Scholarly Editing* for this volume. It was really interesting. I think people are going to enjoy it a lot.

[credits]